

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

Recording all plants growing wild in Somerset, not just the rarities



Meeting Report



Meeting at the Town Bridge before splitting into two groups to record on either side of the Vice- County boundary. Photo: SJL

Sunday 2nd January 2022. Bridgwater, VC5 and VC6

Leaders: Liz McDonnell & Simon Leach

Report: Liz McDonnell & Fred Rumsey

On an overcast damp morning, 11 members and friends met at the Town Bridge in Bridgwater to take part in the annual BSBI New Year Plant Hunt (NYPH), which involves recording plants *in flower* in a three-hour period during any of the first four days of January. The venue was chosen to allow us to divide up into two teams, one recording on the west side of the River Parrett in VC5 (South Somerset), the other on the east side in VC6 (North Somerset). And so the two groups went their separate ways, arranging

to meet up at the end of the day to compare notes and brag about what they'd seen!

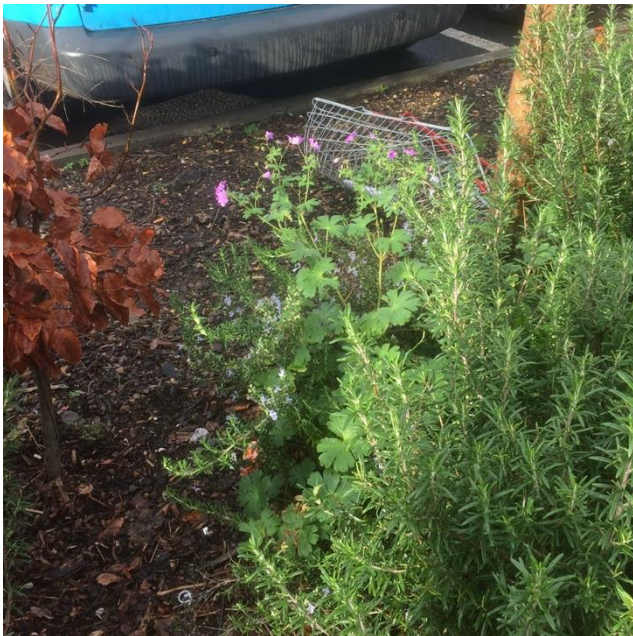
Liz's VC6 group made their slow way over the Town Bridge, recording the plants on the retaining walls and bridge masonry. This area had been well recorded by SRPG in 2019, but the decision was made to record all the plants that we found, not only those in flower.

Our first flowering species was Ivy-leaved Toadflax (*Cymbalaria muralis*) which seems to flower all year round. We found the dead remains of the long pods of Eastern Rocket (*Sisymbrium orientale*) as we crossed the bridge and then wandered along the pavements and mown grassland beside the river. Here we found other all-year-round flowerers – such

as Daisy (*Bellis perennis*), Shepherd's-purse (*Capsella bursa-pastoris*) and Smooth Sow-thistle (*Sonchus oleraceus*). There were a few flat rosettes of Corky-fruited Water-dropwort (*Oenanthe pimpinelloides*), but certainly not flowering, in the municipal grassland. We examined the roadsides and shrubberies amongst the supermarkets and shops and made our way to the churchyard of St John the Baptist church. Here we found Primrose (*Primula vulgaris*) and False Oxlip (*Primula x polyantha*) flowering and both Creeping Buttercup (*Ranunculus repens*) and Bulbous Buttercup (*R. bulbosus*) in flower too.

We stopped the clock for a short lunch break whilst sheltering from the rain and then carried on along the busy retail-outlet area where Hedgerow Crane's-bill (*Geranium pyrenaicum*) was flowering profusely amongst the rubbish at the edge of a car park.

Our most interesting find was probably Hawkweed Oxtongue (*Picris hieracioides*), several plants of which were found still flowering in a scruffy lane in an industrial lorry area. It had been recorded here in 2019 and seems to be thriving in this rather unpromising habitat. We found Black Horehound (*Ballota nigra*), White Dead-nettle (*Lamium album*) and Field Madder (*Sherardia arvensis*) on the way



Hedgerow Crane's-bill thriving in the town. Photo: EJMCD

back to the river along The Drove and East Quay. A count at the end of our allotted time indicated that the VC6 group had found 51 species in flower and we waited to meet up with the VC5 group to find out how they had done...

Meanwhile, the VC5 group turned their backs on VC6 and the temptations of the riverbank which lay just outside their chosen monad, and headed instead into the jumble of streets where a mix of commercial properties, houses and brownfield sites offered the promise of flowers. Unlike our VC6 counterparts we decided that our target monad, ST2937, had been well worked recently and we therefore largely focussed on species in flower, to good effect as it transpired. We must have looked a very suspicious bunch, furtling in the less salubrious corners of car parks and the yards behind shops.

One of the first plants of note, although past flowering, was the large form of Fern-grass (*Catapodium rigidum* ssp. *majus*) with the remains of its rather striking 3D spiky inflorescences. Nearby, in a car park off Kings Place, a small cluster of the distinctly glandular Sticky Groundsel (*Senecio viscosus*) was our first 'front of card' find. Moving on to Kings Square we had to tackle the NYP Hunter's perennial dilemma - when is a plant cultivated and thus inadmissible? Somewhat arbitrarily, while the Crocuses here weren't counted or entered on the form, as they'd quite clearly been planted, we *did* decide to include Greater Snowdrop (*Galanthus elwesii*), various-sized clumps of which were growing under trees at the edge of the square where it seemed to have become well naturalised. Or maybe we just fancy snowdrops more than crocuses?

Heading back towards the car park where many of us had left our vehicles, a grassy bank revealed a single rosette of Bee Orchid (*Ophrys apifera*). At the interface of lawns and pavements there was Musk Stork's-bill (*Erodium moschatum*) which eventually revealed a few flowers newly opened. This is surely an increasing species in the county?

We then made our way towards the basin of the Bridgwater Docks, the weather worsening, a bleakness added to by the now-vacant jetties. It did however prove productive florally, particularly for the small annual crucifers of shallow soils, a lock-side supplying flowering Whitlow-grass (*Erophila verna*), alongside Thale Cress (*Arabidopsis thaliana*) almost overlooked amongst Shepherd's-purse (*Capsella bursa-pastoris*). Continuing westwards amongst rather derelict buildings the waterside provided a few late fresh flowers on Common Nettles (*Urtica dioica*), while showier blooms of Large Bindweed (*Calystegia sylvatica*) and a hefty Bramble identified by Simon as 'Himalayan Giant'

(*Rubus armeniacus*) climbed over wire fencing by a warehouse yard.

Driving rain forced a retreat to cover by the dock basin where we grazed as we stood, having stopped our clock. After lunch, we made our way along the basin side under new apartments where various escapes from hanging baskets flourished, including Garden Pansies (*Viola x wittrockiana*) and Bacopa (*Sutera cordata*). Pavement edges in a car park behind Poskitt House were being colonised by Balkan Spurge (*Euphorbia oblongata*), another fast-increasing species, although we failed to find any in flower. Similarly vegetative was Strawberry Clover (*Trifolium fragiferum*), on a bank by Seaward Drive, a native species that turned out to be new to the monad.

The group then continued out to the northern edge of ST2937 along the riverbank, before cutting across to meet the Western Way as it arcs round. Here flowering Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) was seen, with some relief. A brief foray to allotment edges and verges on the west side of the road netted Simon a few more flowers including Common Rampion-fumitory (*Fumaria muralis* ssp. *boraiei*). The new estate east of the road was not hugely productive, although a few weeds that we had expected to find earlier in the day, such as Water Bent aka 'Teddy Bear grass' (*Polypogon viridis*), did finally materialise.

Mindful that time was ticking away and with the other group to re-join, we were forced to resort to aerial photography on Cath's phone to escape the maze of dreary streets with botanically promising names and seemingly endless cul-de-sacs. Competitive to the last, the discovery of Henbit Dead-nettle (*Lamium amplexicaule*), just out of time, just out of our square, and probably only in bud, was the source of much angst. We however took great delight in announcing our score of 90 to those of the VC6 contingent who had so patiently awaited our late arrival. This total was to prove the fourth largest nationally. (Modesty forbids saying who came third).